

7 January 2015

Housing and Health Committee

Armed Forces Community Covenant

Report of: *Helen Gregory, Acting Head of Housing Service*

Wards Affected: *All*

This report is: *Public*

1. Executive Summary

- 1.1 As part of the recent review of the Council's Allocation policy additional preference/exemption was awarded to members of the Armed Forces and their families in regard to the Local Connection criteria. These groups are exempt from having to demonstrate a local connection and are able to join the housing waiting list.
- 1.2 However, having reviewed other Local Authorities' Allocations Policies it has demonstrated that we need to consider providing additional support to members of the Armed Forces community by publishing a supplementary document alongside the Council's Allocation Policy.
- 1.3 The supplementary document, in the short term will address the immediate housing issues members of the Armed Forces community face, while in the long term further consideration can be made in a commitment to an Armed Forces Community Covenant.

2. Recommendation(s)

- 2.1 That approval is given to Option 3 to develop a tailored Housing Advice Service aimed to address the needs of the Armed Forces Community.**

3. Introduction and Background

3.1 Local authorities and the Armed Forces community are encouraged to work together to establish a community covenant in their area to;

- Encourage local communities to support the Armed Forces community, raise understanding and awareness among the public of issues that affect the Armed Forces community
- Recognise and remember the sacrifices faced by the Armed Forces community
- Encourage activities which help to integrate the Armed Forces community into local life
- Encourage the Armed Forces community to help and support the wider community and encourage other forms of engagement

3.2 The key issues relevant and important to service leavers and their families when leaving military service are;

- Integration into civilian communities
- Housing, including access into affordable housing
- Overcoming barriers to home ownership
- Home adaptations
- Education
- Debt advice
- Accessing benefits
- Leisure facilities
- Healthcare provision
- Employment
- Public transport

3.3 Housing is a primary concern for some service leavers and their families, who when they leave the service, lose their military accommodation or in other cases while not in military accommodation may have had to move to other areas to complete their service. In some cases they may have had to move several times preventing them from establishing settled roots in any one area, and therefore wish to return to an area where they had or currently have a local connection or to engage with other services, or simply choose to move to a particular area simply by choice, some examples may include;

- Family
- Friends
- Specialist medical support

- Employment
- Education

- 3.4 Due to the specialist and mobile nature of their work members of the Armed Forces can be placed at considerable disadvantage when trying to access social or affordable housing. This is particularly relevant if Local Authorities bear significant weight in applying their Local Connection criteria to applicants. In some cases this could result in Local Authorities refusing to accept service leavers onto housing registers if they fail to meet particular local connection criteria, particularly where some service leavers have been required to move to several different areas during the course of their service.
- 3.5 As a result of the problems service leavers encountered when leaving active service the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) issued guidance to Local Authorities in England in June 2012. This advised of the new statutory provisions that mean that, where an application for housing is made within 5 years of discharge, members of the Armed Forces, former service personnel, bereaved spouses and civil partners and serving or former members of the reserve forces cannot be prevented from accessing social housing waiting lists or other affordable housing on local connection grounds. In addition, certain categories of people must be awarded 'additional preference'. The guidance also encouraged local authorities to strongly consider the needs of the Armed Forces community when framing their allocation policies. Some Local Authorities have already used the discretion available to them to address disadvantages faced by members of the Armed Forces community.
- 3.6 In February 2014, Lord Ashcroft published the 'Veterans' Transition Review which examined the transition of Armed Forces personnel from their military careers to civilian life at the end of their service. As part of this independent review, the policies and provision for service leavers in areas including education, training, employment, health, housing, welfare and finance were considered and recommendations made upon with a broad conclusion underlining the importance of the supply of information for service leavers to make a successful transition. The Government in response outlined how it will improve the experience of service personnel and their families moving into civilian life. Local Authorities and Armed Forces personnel are encouraged to work together to establish a community covenant in their relevant area in order to promote and encourage integration and increase awareness among the public of issues affecting their community.

- 3.7 There are currently 117 active members of the British Legion within the Borough, which include serving members, former members and families of the Armed Forces.

4. Issue, Options and Analysis of Options

- 4.1 In summary there are three available options that need to be given consideration;

Option 1

Give consideration to signing up to the Essex Community Covenant with a separate Borough Specific action plan. This option is a longer term plan as this will require;

- Corporate staffing resource commitment
- Buy in from the Leader, Deputy Leader, Senior Councillors, Leader of the Opposition
- Commitment from Senior Management/Officers
- Commitment for staffing resources from other departments, i.e. benefits, housing, community services
- Engagement with all other agencies/organisations

Option 2

Give consideration to developing a Borough Specific Community Covenant with a separate action plan. This option is a longer term plan as this will require;

- Corporate staffing resource commitment
- Buy in from the Leader, Deputy Leader, Senior Councillors, Leader of the Opposition
- Commitment from Senior Management/Officers
- Commitment for staffing resources from other departments, i.e. benefits, housing, community services
- Engagement with all other agencies/organisations

Option 3

Give consideration to developing a Housing Needs & Prevention Service that is tailored to the needs of Armed Service Personnel and their families. This option would enable an immediate service provision and develop Housing Needs Strategy to address the needs of the Armed Forces Community as part of enhancement to current Allocations Policy.

Buy in from Leader, Deputy Leader, Senior Councillors, Leader of Opposition
Commitment from Senior Management/Officers
Commitment for housing staff resource
Engagement with other departments, i.e. benefits, community services
Engagement with all other agencies/organisations

5. Reasons for Recommendation

5.1 Members are requested to approve Option 3 as a short term measure which will enable immediate service provision to members of the Armed Forces and their families. This will include;

Additional priority to be given to members of the Armed Forces and their families in respect of the current Allocations Policy;

- 5 years backdating of a housing application to increase points entitlement
- Exception to the financial restrictions in relation to any compensation given for injury or disability
- Exception to ANY financial restrictions to members of the Armed Forces or families.

To develop a specialised Housing Advice pathway approach for members of the Armed Forces;

- Identify Armed Forces champion within Housing Needs to lead on project
- Identify training opportunities for housing staff, for example; cultural issues relating to members of the ex-service personnel community, barriers to integration, domestic violence and post traumatic stress disorder
- To engage and develop a service Level agreement in respect of Employment Services, Access to Benefits, Schools, Education, GP/Health Services
- To identify Voluntary Agencies/Charities in the Borough
- Create dedicated website page relating to the Armed Forces and create links to other agencies
- Create a specialised housing advice and useful pathway/information links handbook

5.2 This will then provide the opportunity to develop a longer term strategy towards implementation of the Community Covenant.

6. Consultation

- 6.1 No formal consultation has been undertaken to date.
- 6.2 A consultation will take place as part of the implementation of the Housing Pathway Advice Service, guide & website.

7. References to Corporate Plan

- 7.1 Manage our housing differently to recognise council housing as a valuable and limited resource to those in greatest need

8. Implications

Financial Implications

Name & Title: Jo-Anne Ireland, Acting Chief Executive

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- 8.1 The cost of producing the Housing Pathway handbook will be approximately £500 which will be met from existing resources within the HRA.

Legal Implications

Name & Title: Christopher Potter, Monitoring Officer and Head of Support Services

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- 8.2 None

Other Implications (where significant) – i.e. Health and Safety, Asset Management, Equality and Diversity, Risk Management, Section 17 – Crime & Disorder, Sustainability, ICT.

- 8.3 Allocation of Housing (Qualification criteria for Armed Forces) (England) Regulations 2012 SI2012/1869
Localism Act 2011 (Effective June 2012)
Code of guidance on the Allocation of Accommodation (June 2012)

- 9. **Background Papers** (include their location and identify whether any are exempt or protected by copyright)

10. Appendices to this report

Appendix A - Current Authority Service Provision

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